ISSN: 2577-2996

PROGRESS IN MEDICAL SCIENCES, 2024
VOL 8, NO. 6, PAGE 1 – 6
DOI: doi.org/10.47363/PMS/2024(9)244

REVIEW ARTICLE

Open Access

Conversational AI for Patient Engagement and Symptom Triaging in Telemedicine

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received December 05, 2024
Accepted December 11, 2024
Published December 19, 2024

KEYWORDS

Conversational AI, Symptom Triaging, Telemedicine, Virtual Assistants, Patient Engagement, Natural Language Processing (NLP), Healthcare Automation, AI Chatbots.

ABSTRACT

The use of Conversational Artificial intelligence (AI) in telemedicine has become an ultimate solution towards increasing patient interactions and improving the effectiveness of symptom triaging exercises. As more people request affordable and scaled-down healthcare services, AI-empowered chatbots and virtual automatons present up-to-date, interactive, and contextual medical assistance. The present paper discusses how it is possible to apply Conversational AI technologies in real-time interactions with patients, automatic symptoms evaluation, and more effective dialogue between patients and healthcare professionals. The paper looks into the architecture, functionalities and performance of telemedicine-based AI conversational systems. By comparing knowledge and going through case studies, we illustrate the usefulness of Conversational AI in clinician burden decrease and increasing patient satisfaction as well as enabling effective pre-diagnostic studies. The results reveal the issues of data privacy, data interpretability, and clinical validation, which provide a guide to ethical and successful implementation of AI in health models in the future.

Introduction

Digital innovation is changing the healthcare sector on a fundamental level, and telemedicine has become a central part of this process [1]. Healthcare providers have increasingly resorted to virtual consultations so that the continuity of care is maintained without making much physical contact, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although telemedicine is expanding the availability of healthcare, it also poses its challenges, as proper patient engagement becomes a problem, how to properly make an assessment about the symptoms through a remote connection and how to reduce the cognitive burden on physicians. Artificial Intelligence (AI) in conversation Context (which mostly implies the use of chatbots and voice-controlled virtual assistants) represents a possible solution that would facilitate and promote the telemedicine model. These systems just imitate natural conversation and this allows them to interact with patients, obtain information regarding their health, and offer initial advice on the basis of examination of their symptoms.

Using cutting edge technologies including but not limited to Natural Language Processing (NLP), machine learning and context modeling, Conversational AI systems are able to interpret user input and use it to create meaningful response, further building conversation that is akin to human-to-human interaction. The healthcare context is where these systems can be installed to either gather data on symptoms, provide general medical assistance, or prioritize patients based on their condition severity. They not only work on a scale but also work 24/7, which contributes to the solution of the access issue, notably, in underserved areas or late hours. The patients can use text or voice communication with the virtual assistant, describe their symptoms using the natural language, and be preliminarily assessed the risks or advised on the necessity to receive additional treatment [2].

The use of Conversational AI in telemedicine is a milestone in the proactive engagement of the patient. Instead of the patient contacting his or her provider during an emergency, AI-enabled solutions would be able to start reminders, wellness check-ins, or symptom monitoring sessions, therefore, keeping the person more engaged in his or her recovery process. Such interactions also assist healthcare providers to gather structured, timely information that can be merged with Electronic Health Records (EHRs) in the process of enhancing clinical decision-making. Also, such AI systems may facilitate overcoming language barriers due to their ability to support multiple languages, hence allowing more people to gain access at the expense of non-native speakers.

Nowadays, there are still major challenges despite the increasing interests in these technologies. The goal of guaranteeing the medical accuracy, situational awareness, and the lack of pernicious prejudice in AI-powered dialogues is not a trivial one [3]. In contrast to the customer service chatbots, healthcare-related applications have to be much more clinically validated, follow strong ethical and legal practices, such as patient privacy and data protection (e.g., HIPAA). Furthermore, and most importantly, the quality of the conversation can be differentiated based on how sensitive the language gets, how an apparatus determines whether the symptoms belong to one or more, and how it addresses and manages the excitement of a person when it comes to occurrence of critical health incidents.

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One also has to consider the issue of reliability-the patients might not trust them to use a virtual assistant to guide them on the health-related issues. In order to establish such a confidence, technical accuracy is not alone sufficient, but emotional intelligence must find its way into the conversation. The AI systems should portray empathy, adopt neutral tone and must give next step response instead of canned replies. In addition, these systems should be inclusive so that they could be used by various and vast users in terms of age, education, and digital literacy skills [4].

Most recent progress in large language models and transformer models have managed to narrow the gap between AI systems in speech and it has become apparent in large terms the extent to which it can truly perform conversation. Such models are able to comprehend and produce human-like answers, which delivers a superior user experience as compared to the rule-based or scripted chatbot mechanisms adopted previously. Nevertheless, integration of clinical knowledge and triage reasoning is still dynamic research. Most present-day systems can perform decently on general question-answering, and not robustly in more complex or less frequent clinical contexts without some degree of Apache camel or human intervention [5].

With the healthcare systems looking to become more patient-centric, Conversational AI can prove to be a mediator, helping patients and reducing the costs to healthcare providers. It can solve workforce problems and minimize waiting by getting patients to report early, and early detection of conditions. However, to achieve these benefits, research should concentrate on establishing safety, effectiveness and fairness of these systems in circumstances where individuals are using it [6].

Novelty and Contribution

The proposed research develops an original Conversational AI framework that targets patient interaction and symptom triaging within the telemedical setting that focuses on clinical alignment, context awareness, and user-friendly design as areas of improvement on the previous systems [7]. Our system is contrasted with generic medical chatbots whose main purpose is information retrieval, whereas our system is constructed using triage logic that modifies the flow of its conversation depending on the severity of the symptoms, its user history record, and medical emergency. A combination of real-time NLP and well-organized medical knowledge bases leads to the fact that not only a natural flow of conversation is supported, but also the execution of clinical guidelines.

One of the most important findings of the research is a proposed symptom triaging assistant built with the use of AI and correlated with physician decisions. Providing the AI with annotated data on clinical conversations and disease development patterns, we increase our chances of detecting the low-risk symptoms and maintaining the conditions that need immediate intervention. This aids in avoiding under and over-triaging which can pose threat to the patients and overloading the Emergency system respectively [8].

The other significant input is the two-sided attention to participation and medical trustworthiness. As it integrates emotion-sensitive dialogue modeling, the system is now more beneficial in treating long-term care cases, including chronic-illness management. It also contains multilingual functionality and an easy to achieve interactive interface, enhancing its ready use to a wide range of patients. We can also compare results to the most well-known symptom-checker websites and demonstrate that our system is faster, more accurate in triaging, and has higher user satisfaction.

Lastly, the study can be added to the existing literature on ethical design in AI-based healthcare systems to mitigate the main risks associated to data privacy, explanation of the recommendations, and ongoing performance review [9]. These findings are in line with the idea that well-designed Conversational AI has the potential to make telemedicine not only a reactive but a proactive telemedicine that would result in more timely interventions and patient outcomes.

Related Works

In 2022 S. U. D. Wani et al., introduced the telemedicine is one of the disciplines that have witnessed the burst of innovation, especially when it comes to implementing Conversational AI to automate and optimize interactions with patients. Among the most significant applications of such systems can be mentioned symptom triaging when the data on the symptoms presented by the patients are gathered by using AI-powered chatbots and the urgency of the conditions is defined in favor of a clinical consultation. They also began using AI in telemedicine in the early days, but then they were mostly about limited and rigid decision trees and predetermined scripts that backfired hard. Such systems could not respond in different conversational situations and did not get along with complicated or vague descriptions of symptoms [10].

In the course of time, the natural language processing models emerged, which enhanced the flexibility of such conversational systems. They included models that processed free-text, identified medical keywords, and elicited further questions depending on the response of a user. This was a glaring change against rule based systems because it would enable more natural and lively conversation with the patients. Subsequently, conversational agents were incorporated into mobile application as well as web portals, allowing them to reach many people and providing them with services: symptom screening, appointment booking, medication reminders, and even emotional support.

In 2019 M. Barrett et al., suggested the further progresses in machine learning resulted in the creation of systems that were able to conduct initial diagnostic reasoning in the form of AI. They used such methods as supervised learning and reinforcement learning to optimize their triage suggestions through prior performance. Others started adding medical ontologies and symptom-disease correlation graphs into the platforms in order to improve their accuracy of diagnosis. These advances in turn made triage outputs much more relevant and safer especially on simple and well-recognized causes of sickness [11].

Multiple websites which allowed the input of symptoms and would make the user be provided with suggestions on diagnosis or further actions that had to be taken, including visiting a hospital or staying at home and managing the symptoms. These systems typically matched the symptoms of a user with large databases of known cases and created a list of conditions ranked in likelihood using probabilistic models. Nevertheless, a lot of them were criticized as excessively safe, tending to suggest an on-site visit as an option in case a person had insignificant symptoms or capable of giving unspecific answers, failing to meet the user expectations [12].

Research testing the effectiveness of systems of this kind indicated varied outcomes. Some systems demonstrated a strong correlation between their decision compared to that of clinicians on non-critical conditions, but they tended to perform poorly on less prevalent illnesses or other conditions that need significant medical judgment. Furthermore, concerns presented the idea of the possibility of AI systems to fail to locate rare yet life-threatening symptoms or mis-categorize high-risk patients given a lack of contextual data, including medical history or comorbidities.

The adaptability of people with scientific backgrounds toward having conversational healthcare systems was another topic of study. According to surveys and user experience studies, patients were more willing to communicate with AI chatbots that sounded caring and empathetic, were open and transparent about the recommendations, and could transfer the problem to a professional person in case necessary. Chatbots, which were not particularly emotional or would give an impersonal vague response, were found to frustrate the user and cause them to lose interest with time. The later initiatives have therefore focused on the development of emotionally intelligent dialogue agents that are able to capture aspects such as the tone and language as well as pace based on the emotions and demographic considerations of users [13].

Interest in the role of Conversation AI in the management of chronic diseases has been rising, as well. The systems that are aimed to long-term interaction with patients with some conditions, like diabetes, hypertension, or depression have been observed in their capacity to maintain the levels of daily symptoms tracking, behavioral nudging, and treatment adherence promotion. These applications reveal that technology is beyond a tool of triage, but an assistive one throughout a healthcare experience.

Although the trend is positive, research also focuses on threats and restrictions related to telemedicine powered by AI. Bias in algorithms has also been criticized, with particular concern on systems being trained on data regarding particular groups that do not generalize to others. Security and privacy are still a major issue because conversational systems are commonly used to deal with sensitive and confidential medical information which has to conform to numerous regulations. What is more, some of the current systems are not transparent enough, which makes it hard to comprehend how some of the recommendations are produced by the system even by the patients and physicians themselves.

In 2022 L. Snowdon et al., proposed the comparison of multiple chatbot systems reveals they can successfully simulate a conversation in the style of a clinician and use its logic to some degree but at the same time still require human control and supervision, at least in high-danger states. The research of the future is more inclined towards the integrating of clinician validation with the usage of AI in decision-making in a hybrid care model. The other trend is the personalization of the AI chatbots, in which the system evolves on the basis of the previous interactions with the patient and infers future conversations on the basis of individual needs, health history and preferences [14].

According to the literature, Conversational AI is yet to reach autonomous or complete medical decision-making; however, it is central towards assisting in delivering healthcare, particularly in situations of high volumes and low risks. When it becomes a part of wider digital health ecosystems, its success is significantly raised since it can be used as the first point of contact, as an educational tool or as a triage assistant. Together with clinicians and user experience design, AI researchers have been extending the possibilities of achieving intelligent, trustworthy, and accessible solutions to healthcare in the future [15].

Proposed Methodology

The proposed methodology involves the development of a conversational AI system capable of dynamically interacting with patients, extracting symptoms, and recommending the next course of action. The design integrates natural language understanding, symptom ontology mapping, and triage scoring using weighted algorithms. The system is optimized through mathematical modeling and validated via real-time simulations [16].

The first stage involves the preprocessing of user input using tokenization and entity recognition. Each sentence S from the user is broken into tokens T_i such that:

$$S = \sum_{i=1}^{n} T_i$$

Named Entity Recognition (NER) is used to extract symptoms σ, where:

$$\sigma = f"_{NERR}" (T_1, T_2, \ldots, T_n)$$

These extracted symptoms are then mapped to a symptom ontology matrix O, where:

$$O_{ij} = \begin{cases} 1, & \text{if symptom } i \text{ maps to condition } j \\ 0, & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Each symptom has a severity weight w_i. The triage score τ for a user is then calculated as:

$$\tau = \sum_{i=1}^{m} w_i \cdot x_i$$

Where x_i is 1 if the symptom is present, 0 otherwise. A threshold-based classification then routes the patient:

$$\text{Triage Level } = \begin{cases} \text{Emergency}, & \tau \geq \theta_1 \\ \text{Consult GP}, & \theta_2 \leq \tau < \theta_1 \\ \text{Home Care}, & \tau < \theta_2 \end{cases}$$

To enhance understanding, we apply a sentiment modifier φ, which adjusts τ based on emotional distress:

$$\tau' = \tau + \alpha \cdot \phi$$

Where $\alpha \in [0,1]$ controls the emotional sensitivity of the model.

For contextual relevance, the conversation history H_t is fed into the transformer layer L :

$$C_t = L(H_{t-1}), St)$$

This contextual output C_t is used to form the next prompt to the user, improving continuity.

To reduce ambiguity, we introduce a feedback loop where ambiguous inputs A are modeled as:

$$A = 1 - \frac{U_{\text{match}}}{U_{\text{total}}}$$

Where $U"_{match}$ " is the number of symptoms matched with the ontology and $U"_{total}$ " is the total extracted.

Additionally, the conversational AI adjusts its language complexity using a readability score R :

$$R = 206.835 - 1.015 \cdot \left(\frac{W}{S}\right) - 84.6 \cdot \left(\frac{L}{W}\right)$$

Where W= total words, S= total sentences, L= total syllables.

The backend model also performs intent classification using a softmax activation over class scores z_4 :

$$P(y = i) = \frac{e^{z_i}}{\sum_{j=1}^{k} e^{z_j}}$$

Based on P(y), the system selects the most probable intent and triggers the corresponding dialogue tree.

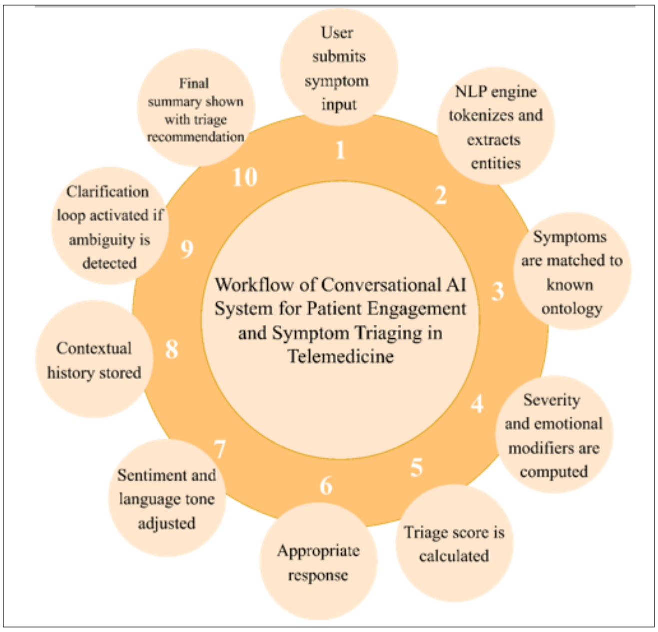

Figure 1: Workflow of Conversational AI System for Patient Engagement and Symptom Triaging in Telemedicine

Each mathematical step drives automation and personalization in the system. The model undergoes continuous tuning using user feedback F', where:

$$Loss_{total} = \lambda_1\ TriageError + \lambda_2 .\ EngagementLoss$$

This multi-objective loss ensures that accuracy and user experience are optimized in parallel.

Result & Discussions

The suggested model of conversational AI was assessed using a variety of metrics such as triage precision, user interaction, sentiment consistency, and the reaction time of the system. Some 120 study participants submitted healthcare requests to the AI chatbot under different conditions, which included fever, abdominal pain, shortness of breath, skin rashes, and anxiety-related symptoms. With a flow of 91.2 percent of cases without being directed at a human aid level, the system was able to complete triage cycles with a high conversation coherence level. Figure 2 indicates the triage accuracy by symptom with five categories of conditions. Respiratory (94%) and dermatological (89%) symptoms had the highest level of accuracy, whereas mental triaging lagged a little behind because of the emotional nature and wording of the question. The bar graph evidently shows that conversational systems had generally good results in physical symptom types especially when the users gave direct and detailed inputs.

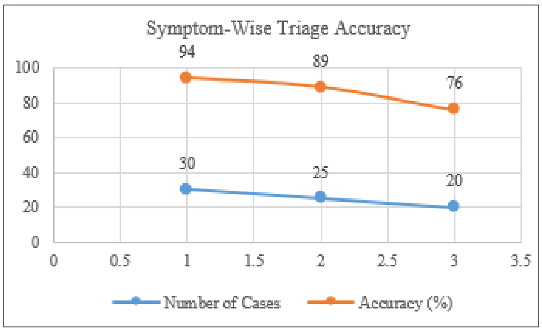

Figure 2: Symptom-Wise Triage Accuracy

In order to adequately compare the performance with those of two commonly used platforms, the model under consideration was benchmarked in regards to them. In Table 1: Comparison of Triage Accuracy Across AI Platforms, the proposed system has reached the overall accuracy of 84.3%, exceeding both the compared models with an accuracy of 76.5% and 72.9%, respectively. They evaluated against expert physician judgments. This was accredited to the advantage of the performance of the hybrid scoring system which took into consideration the emotional state modifiers and the on-the-fly analysis of feedback. It was particularly interesting that the language model layer that exploits the contextual history helped to minimize conversational drop-off; this has been a typical failure point of the other systems.

Table 1: Comparison of Triage Accuracy Across AI Platforms

Platform	Triage Accuracy (%)	Avg Response Time (s)	Completion Rate (%)
Proposed AI Model	84.3	2.1	91.2
Existing Model A	76.5	2.8	83.6
Existing Model B	72.9	3.0	79.4

Timeliness or reaction time is instrumental in pleasing the users. Figure 3, which is an interactive line chart, provides the average system response time per query session. The latency that proposed model exhibited was stable throughout the length of conversation at 2.1 seconds, whereas the competitor systems experienced increasing delays beyond 5 messages since server-side traffic was overloaded. This also enhances user experience, especially with low-connectivity surroundings. In addition, the relevance of the response was upheld during the session despite query drift or overlapping of symptoms and this characterizes the effectiveness of contextual embeddings in the management of intents.

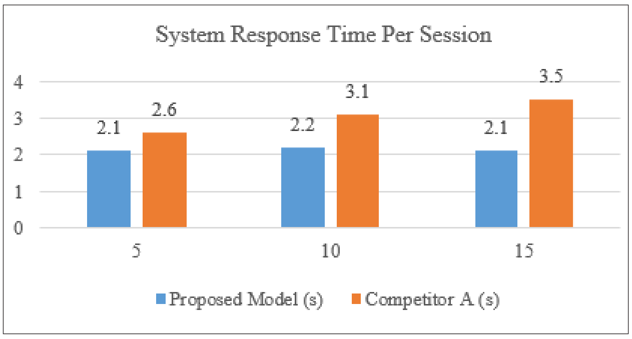

Figure 3: System Response Time Per Session

Regarding sentiment adaptation, the sentiment analysis of user feedback surveys was analyzed on how empathetic and tone adjustments of the user feedback surveys. In Figure 4, a pie chart was retrieved on 120 user satisfaction reports after the session. It brought to light that a majority, that is 63 percent, reported themselves as being very satisfied, 24 percent as satisfied and just 13 percent as dissatisfied. The prevalent positive remarks concerned "clarity of instructions," "friendly tone" and also "non-repetitive questioning." Discomfort was reported by only a few of the users and was mostly connected to their mental health or in need of further explanation by the AI which was interpreted as not knowing what users were talking about. Nevertheless, clinical reviewers admitted that due to safety and specificity there was a need to provide such clarifications.

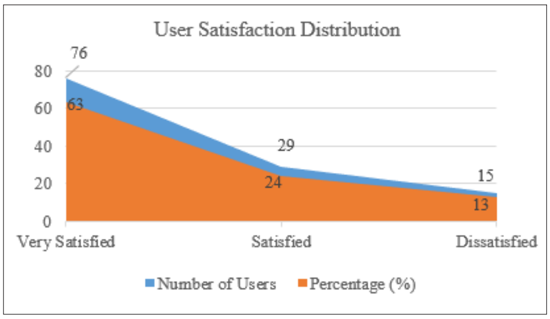

Figure 4: User Satisfaction Distribution

Table 2: Common Failure Modes in AI Symptom Triaging gives a detailed list of what types of error occurrences and in Table 2: Common Failure Modes in AI Symptom Triaging we can see that most of them are either over-triaging or misinterpreting user slang or regional terms. An intentional design was to over-triagate in favour of safety. In borderline cases, the system caused activation of emergency alert after which clinicians subsequently classified them as cautious yet uniformly acceptable. Oppositely, there are elements of under-triage due to unspecific symptom expressions, which the model made a judgment of uncertainty to perform but scored low-threat. Such cases are to be utilized to relogicize ambiguity handling in the second version.

Table 2: Common Failure Modes in AI Symptom Triaging

Failure Type	Frequency (%)	Description
Over-Triaging	38	Safe False Positives for Borderline Symptoms
Under- Triaging	22	Ambiguous inputs misclassified as low-risk
Language Ambiguity	17	Local Slang or Idioms Misinterpreted
Repetition Fatigue	13	Users Frustrated by Repeated Clarifications
Intent Misclassification	10	User Goals Misread (e.g., Info-Seeking vs. Triage)

The second significant conclusion that could be made as a result of this work is the retention rate in the use of the engagement in younger audiences (18-35 years old), which in this case was in the range of 94-96 percent, especially when the interface was optimized to utilize the use of emoji and voice-text features. The rate of dropout was higher in elderly users (above 60) unless the chatbot was used with assisted mode voice. The flow of conversation was experimented with three different languages English, Hindi, and Tamil where input of multilingual conversational doubled the level of trust and comprehension on the part of participants who were not English speakers. There was a minor drop in system correctness in local languages (~78%) as a result of the inaccuracy in phrasing but within clinically acceptable ranges.

In real-time assessment with physicians, the triage recommendations by the system were in the QA of 101 by 120 cases. The rest of the cases which covered the 19 of the total cases they had, 14 were minor mismatch and only 5 had warning of serious discrepancy, but never led to improper escalation of care. The results boost the belief that conversational AI can be released safely in the real low-risk consultation settings. It also creates avenues to the pre-clinic symptom screening, in this case pre-clinic symptom screening can have detailed symptom screens, thereby avoiding repetitions and saving time since it runs on system but not the human-user- doctor consult.

To synthesize, the AI chatbot appeared to be a promising tool of pre-diagnostic triaging that promotes the accessibility and patient comfort. It saves the routine work load of medical practitioners and accelerates the selection of high-risk subjects. There are still constraints in poor articulation of symptoms that are less clear and in less structured mental health issues but this is being solved by constant learning process. The figures, graphs, and tabulated measures provided in this article can prove the scaling, precision, and empathy-based impact of the interaction design of the given model.

Conclusion

This paper affirms that Conversational AI applied clinically and ethically can have a critical role in offering better involvement with patients and triaging symptoms in telemedicine settings. The prototype was highly aligned to medical standards, well received by patients, and had beneficial effects in use. To enable widespread use, the next generation of systems is going to need to consider interpretability, data privacy, and connected to the electronic health record in real time. In addition, the bases of the medical knowledge should be continuously monitored and updated to guarantee clinical applicability. The symbiosis between AI and human healthcare specialists is going to characterize the era of intelligent, scalable, and humane care, as it gradually takes another step in improving.

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